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THE HARVARD COURSE
IN
PHOTOPLAY WRITING



UNIT IV.

Continuity.

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CONTINUITY.

Continuity Writing is the process of putting the Synopsis into the technical form in which the scenes of the finished play will appear upon the screen. Practically all the studios maintain their own staffs of Continuity Writers, who write the technical scenario script for the plays accepted for submission, and as a general rule motion picture producers do not expect, nor, indeed, desire playwrights to submit their plays in continuity form. It is the Detailed Synopsis, and the Detailed Synopsis only, which is wanted by the studios.

As we have said, however, you cannot hope to construct an acceptable synopsis until you write the entire continuity --the complete scenario in scene form-- and rewrite your detailed synopsis from the continuity. (See Unit III. of The Harvard Course in Photoplay Writing.) Writing your own continuity for your synopsis will enable you to furnish all necessary detail --without which you play, after all, is not a play-- and also will show up any weak spots in your story, thus affording you a chance to eliminate them. The vast majority of failures can be traced to the fact that many new writers do not trouble to write the continuity, or that they do not know how to write it, or that they

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follow an antiquated, or, in many cases, an entirely wrong system.

In the following pages is given the most modern method of continuity writing, as followed by the most prominent studios of today.

Every scene in a film is numbered, and in writing the continuity you must visualize your scenes as you wish them to appear upon the screen. A reel is about 1,000 feet of film, and has an average of between 20 and 30 scenes, depending on the length of the scenes. It follows, therefore, that you must so construct your scenes that they will fit this requirement. A little experience will give you the necessary technique; it will help you, too, to know that, roughly speaking, a thousand words of action in your Detailed Synopsis will constitute a reel.

INTRODUCING YOUR CHARACTERS.

b Your first step in writing your continuity for your play will be to introduce your characters to the audience, taking care, however, not to give rise to confusion in doing so. The best way is to introduce them one by one, as they appear in the story.

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SCENES.

A scene is just what the word implies. Each time the camera has to be moved constitutes a new, distinct and separate scene. For instance, the elevating spectacle of Mrs. O'Grady quarreling with her husband in the kitchen would be one scene; but if Mr. O'Grady presently arise in wrath and chase her from the kitchen and down the front steps, Mrs. O'Grady's hurried progress down the steps would constitute a new scene.

A point to be remembered is that your scenes should each lead up to the other — that they should blend harmoniously and logically, in order not to confuse your audience as to their sequence. Hence, you must be careful when using cut-backs, that is, returning to a previous scene. (See Model Scenario.)

TITLES AND SUBTITLES.

The title of the play itself should have one vital attribute, that of drawing-power from the box-office point of view; and, next, it should be clear, and indicative of the story, without, however, giving away the story. Finally, it should be brief, for it will have to be announced in electric lights from the theatres showing the play.

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The Subtitle (abbreviation :- T.) must bear on the scene which it precedes. Here you may make use of your gift of literary expression to your heart's content. For example, if you show a scene laid in Egypt -- an Arab camp, for instance -- it will be permissible to have this subtitle:

"TO THE OASES OF PALMS AND FLOWERS CAME THE SILENT SONS OF THE DESERT."

Then show a Long Shot of the camp in the distance, and follow with some such subtitle as this:

"AGHA BEY'S CAMP -- HIS HAND AGAINST EVERY MAN,
..... AND EVERY MAN'S HAND AGAINST HIM."

Subtitles should not be used, however, if the action of the play can be made to tell the story. Above all, you must be careful not to give the action away in your subtitle.

Besides subtitles, it is sometimes found necessary to employ either or both the remaining expedients, i.e. :

Speeches or Spoken Parts, in which the words the character is supposed to speak are flashed upon the screen,

or such matter as

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Letters,

Telegrams,

Newspaper paragraphs, etc.

LAPSES OF TIME.

Lapses of time are expressed either by flashing to a parallel line of action, or else by "fading in" and "fading out." The scene fades out, and the subtitle appears, thus:-

" AS HE NEARED THE WHITE CLIFFS OF ENGLAND ---"

and then the subtitle fades out and the picture of the steamer ploughing through the waves slowly appears.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of "fading.")

CLOSE - UP (Abbreviation:- C.U.)

A Close-Up is an enlarged view of actors or articles, etc. All important bits of action are usually shown in Close-Ups. You will have noticed that photoplays consist largely of these, and of semi-Close-Ups. (See Model Scenario for illustrations.)

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SHOT.

"Shot" is a synonym for "scene," and means exactly the same thing.

A LONG SHOT is a distant scene. All important bits of action should open with a long shot, which should show as much as possible of the locality in which the scene is to take place, so that the audience may become familiar with the respective locations of windows, doors, furniture, etc. The rest of the scene usually consists of Close-Ups, semi-Close-Ups, etc., unless the action engages such a wide area or so many people that they can only be shown in long shots. If you are familiar with the principles of ordinary photography ("Kodakery,") you will have no difficulty in following the above remarks.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of scenes, etc.)

DIAPHRAGM (OR IRIS.)

The diaphragm is a device on the motion picture camera lens which permits the view to be gradually enlarged, or made smaller at will, until the scene appears or disappears. The Iris or Diaphragm should be used when the attention of the audience is to be called to some single object in a scene, such, for instance, as a knife in a drawer, an object on the floor, etc.

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The Iris or Diaphragm is also used sometimes to open or end a scene.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of the use of the Iris.)

FADING.

This is done by regulating the amount of light admitted to the lens of the motion picture camera, making the picture appear or disappear. Scenes are often opened by fade-ins. The fade-in and fade-out also frequently serves to indicate a lapse of time, much in the same way as the curtain is used on the spoken stage.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of the use of fade-ins and fade-outs.)

INSERTS.

Matter such as letters, telegrams, photographs, newspaper paragraphs, etc., are thrown on the screen between the scenes to aid the audience in following the play.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of the use of Inserts.)

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SPOKEN PARTS (OR SPOKEN TITLES.)

(Abbreviation : ~~A~~ S.P.)

A line or lines spoken by a character and thrown upon the screen is termed a Spoken Part or Spoken Title.

(See Model Scenario for illustrations of the use of Spoken Parts.)

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We cannot too strongly urge upon all who would succeed in this profession to attend motion pictures regularly. Analyze them, think over them, and note the situations and the scenes that bring out the actors' finest acting. Look for the technical points in the finished plays projected upon the screen, and look up the elucidation of those points in the units of this Course and the accompanying Model Scenario.

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